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Ivory Plaque From Mele Hairam, Turkmenistan

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Abstract

The exploration works at the Partho-Sassanian fire temple at Mele Hairam, southern Turkmenistan, have yielded a fragmentary preserved double-faced ivory plaque in relief. Although secular character of scenes depicted thereon exclude the possibility of the plaque playing any role in the fire cult, it might have served as a valuable donation to the temple. Alien nature of the scenes indicates foreign provenience of the plaque and may be linked to the ivory and bone items belonging to the so-called Begram Treasure or Hoard, and, more specifically, to local Bactrian workshops. Neither the exact dating of the plaque nor the date of its depositing at the temple can be precisely established. The piece could have, however, easily arrived to the temple due to the latter's unique location in the immediate vicinity of the Silk Road.

Keywords

[Please supply keywords]

The archaeological site of Mele Hairam is located some 15 km east to the modern town of Sarakhs, Sarakhs Oasis, southern Turkmenistan. As a result of extensive archaeological excavations by the Polish-Turkmen Archaeological Mission, commenced in 1997, a Sassanian fire temple has been discovered, which yielded a few but notable small artifacts.¹ Beside numerous copper coins and glass pawns, bronze jewelry items or fragments of figurines, there is an incomplete ivory plaque. Though largely damaged, the piece is of considerable interest as it displays scenes that might be directly linked to those shown on objects belonging to the so-called Begram Treasure or Hoard.

¹ Kaim 2002, 216-219.

Object: Ivory double-faced relief plaque
 Date: ? 1st or 2nd century CE
 Size: Length: 102; Width: 59; Thickness: 155 (mm)
 Motifs: Obverse: Seated woman attended by two females, accompanied by seated male and musician; woman under *torana* gateway.
 Reverse: Fragmentary preserved female figure, elephant and bovine protome.

Description:

OBVERSE SIDE (fig. 1):



Fig. 1. Ivory plaque, Mele Hairam: obverse side.

A complex scene is inscribed in rectangular frames, these consisting of a plain horizontal band on the bottom, a horizontal series of quatrefoils alternating with double horizontal lines, flanked by two vertical plain bands, to the right, and a series of three-stepped elements flanked by two horizontal plain bands, on the top.

The scene is presumably located within certain, at least partially enclosed space accessed through a *torana* gateway depicted immediately left to the horizontal bordering frame of the composition. The *torana* is formed from two uprights and a single and slightly curved architrave, these uniformly ornamented with a pearl motif. Both this type of the *torana* ornamentation and the *torana* itself find close parallels in architectural elements pictured on the

Begram ivory and bone objects, although at Begram prevailing are double-architrave *toranas* of this type.²

The *torana* is the only clearly shown architectural element of the scene though one can argue whether a series of three-stepped motifs forming the upper border for the scene were intended to schematically indicate any roofing elements, more so because they appear as such on stone reliefs from Bharut or Mathura, India.³

A male and a female, both posed sitting, are undoubtedly central figures of the scene. The woman is shown in three-quarter view with her right knee raised and left one resting on the ground, with her left hand on a cushion and with her right one bent up from the elbow and grasping an indistinct object (? mirror) handed over or held for her by one of the attendants. The mistress is shown wearing a long-sleeved tunic-like garment with a V-neck, and a transparent tight long *antariya* with a striped *sash*. Her prominence is further stressed by her conical headdress and elaborated jewelry consisting of oblong earrings, multiple bracelets extending from the wrist to the elbow, a large anklet and a series of rings built up to the knee-height.

Seated on the woman's right, the male is depicted frontally, save for his head in three-quarter view, with his knees raised and slightly apart, with his feet on a footrest. His left hand rests on his knee while the right one is shown bent up from the elbow and holding a small cup. Just above the right shoulder of the man, there is a branch of a tree in fruit almost identical to the one carved on one of bone pieces from Begram.⁴

The man's long dress draped over the left shoulder is reminiscent of a Hellenistic apparel or gown, oft seen in early representations of Buddha. However, a noticeable scant number of male figures depicted on ivory and bone objects in general, including the Begram collection,⁵ prevents from indicating any direct analogies with our male figure. There is a male with a nude upper body depicted on the ivory comb from Tillya Tepe, but baldness is actually the only common characteristic here.⁶

As indicated herein above, both the male and the female figures are depicted seated. The woman is shown on a round stool equipped with a cushion. The stool consists of two narrow plain horizontal bands alternating with zig-zags while the cushion is ornamented with irregularly set punctured dots, which is

² Auboyer 1954, plate D (a); or e.g. Hackin *et al.* 1954, 206, fig. 126 or 200, fig. 132 or 201, fig. 135 or 237, fig. 138.

³ Bharut: Hackin *et al.* 1954, figs. 510 and 512; Mathura: Hackin *et al.* 1954, fig. 471

⁴ Hackin 1939, 69, fig. 94.

⁵ Auboyer 1954, 61.

⁶ Sarianidi 1985, fig. 142.

also the case for the man's cushion. His seat seems to be, however, somewhat more elaborated and equipped with a sort of armrests. It is also accompanied by a footrest filled with two registers of diagonal lines between two plain horizontal bands.⁷ Such seat might have served to indicate his superior position.

The woman's stool ornamentation finds parallels on some Begram objects,⁸ so does a dotted technique widely used for executing animals or occasionally for cushions.⁹ A similar technique may be also seen in two engraved combs, one discovered at Dalverzin-tepe¹⁰ and the other at Taxila.¹¹

Besides two central figures, there are four other humans included in the scene. Immediately left to the horizontal bordering frame of the composition, there is a female figure depicted under the ornamented *torana*. The woman is rendered in three-quarter view, standing at a peculiar angle, oft-seen on the Begram pieces, with her legs slightly bent at the knees and crossed, with her right hip leaning leftwards. Her right hand is carved resting on her right hip and her left arm raised and holding the architrave in a way resembling one of the Begram figures holding a branch of a plant.¹² The woman is depicted wearing a typical Indian garment including a tight striped *antariya* with long loose *sashes*. There are a six-petalled rosette shown above her left shoulder and an indistinct form above her right shoulder.

Two other women are pictured behind the central seated female figure, both performing some toilette acts for their mistress. While the attendant shown on the left is somewhat blurred, the other is depicted wearing an *antariya* and a beaded hip girdle common for the Begram pieces,¹³ earrings and bangles.

Left of the male, there is a fragmentary figure of a musician. Nothing but his or her bare legs, one resting on the cross-hatched footrest, and the other on the ground, are preserved. The musician is playing an arched harp similar to that pictured on one of the Begram pieces.¹⁴

The composition as a whole belongs to scenes of broadly understood relaxation often found depicted on the Begram ivories and bones. Its nature is purely secular: listening to music is connected with some minor toilette acts performed for the central woman by her two attendants.

⁷ For more elaborated version including dotted bands see: Hackin *et al.* 1954, fig. 233.

⁸ E.g. Hackin *et al.* 1954, 200, fig. 132 or 249, fig. 148.

⁹ Animals: e.g. Hackin *et al.* 1954, 196, fig. 101 or 234, fig. 102 or 221, fig. 125; cushions: 1939, 69, fig. 87 or 97, fig. 190.

¹⁰ Pugachenkova, Rveladze *et al.* 1978, 220, fig. 154.

¹¹ Gosh 1947-1948, pl. XX.

¹² Hackin *et al.* 1954, 177, fig. 61.

¹³ E.g. Hackin *et al.* 1954, 181, fig. 144.

¹⁴ Hackin *et al.* 1954, 209, fig. 130.

REVERSE SIDE (fig. 2):



Fig. 2. Ivory plaque, Mele Hairam: reverse side.

There is a female figure depicted frontally, save for her head in three-quarter view. The woman is shown standing behind a fragmentary preserved elephant, with her lower body hidden behind a bovine. She is depicted wearing a long-sleeved garment, round earrings, maybe a thin, plain necklace. She probably intends to touch the elephant or perform any other act relating thereto. The elements carved right to the elephant are obscure, so are ring-like forms seen immediately above.

The bottom of the scene was probably bordered with a plain band, this being wider than the one on the plaque obverse. The ivory is, however, flaking in this part, and any definite determination is thus extremely difficult. To the right, the scene is bordered with a wide plain band and a horizontal series of quatrefoils alternating with double horizontal bands, flanked by two vertical thin lines. Such a band of quatrefoil forms, each two separated by a double band, is oft-seen on the Begram ivories and bones, usually as ornamenting *toranas* or ornamented gateways,¹⁵ or forming bordering frames.¹⁶ A single-band version is also common for the Begram objects.¹⁷

¹⁵ E.g. Hackin *et al.* 1954, 177-178, fig. 60 or 179, fig. 85.

¹⁶ E.g. Hackin *et al.* 1954, 170, fig. 112.

¹⁷ E.g. Hackin *et al.* 1954, 177, fig. 61 or 188, fig. 113.

Little can be said about this fragmentary composition, although a complexity comparable to that carved on the obverse may be safely conjectured. The scene most probably belongs to the open-air series as the depictions of animals may suggest. It was presumably of secular nature but not a hunting one rather as the laying bovine in the lower left corner adds some degree of peacefulness and inactivity.

In spite of the fact that our piece bears no holes or marks which could indicate any fashion of its fastening, we may safely assume that it did not function originally as an independent element. The fragmentary preservation of the plaque does not permit to definitely determine the object once lavishly embellished with it. However, close parallels to the Begram ivory and bone carvings allow of perceiving our plaque as an ornament for an article of furniture made of some perishable material, most probably wood. As double-faced, the plaque might have originally adorned a back of a chair or a similar object decorated on both sides, where it constituted one decorative panel.

The Mele Hairam piece has been discovered in the wall debris outside the temple ramparts in the north-western sector of the site. This particular location in the immediate vicinity of the temple walls as well as the unique nature of the find itself permits to perceive it to have been once a part of a gift to the temple. The alien character makes it hardly possible that the plaque served as the regular temple equipment or was included in customary offerings. As revealed during the exploration of the sacred precinct, in its last phase of occupation the temple was abandoned with the entire movable equipment and other properties taken away presumably by the temple attendants or priests. This action might be tentatively dated to the 5th century CE and was preceded by blocking both the main entrance to the temple sanctuary and adjacent corridors.¹⁸ There is no clear evidence which could shed any light on the grounds for abandoning the temple, it is not unlikely, however, that the action might have been caused by gradual long-term adverse changes in the local water regime as suggested recently by B. Kaim.¹⁹ Although no traces have been revealed to support the opinion that the decision to abandon was taken hurriedly, the piece was probably thrown away outside the temple enclosure walls after it had broken off from a larger object. It seems, therefore, that preciousness of the material determining intrinsic value of the entire object was either not recognized or ignored.

¹⁸ Kaim 2002, 219

¹⁹ Personal communication.

Dates proposed for the temple can in no way contribute to the dating of the ivory piece but provide *terminus ante quem*, this being the temple abandonment in the 5th century CE. The piece, either as an independent object or as a part of a larger piece, must have been deposited in the temple some time between the temple foundation date in the late Parthian Period and its abandonment. The plaque itself belongs to the luxurious objects group and as such might have been circulating for a long time before having been placed in the temple. A tendency towards depositing objects of much earlier dating is exhibited by another find from the temple, this being a miniature stone column dated to the third millennium BC.²⁰

As far as the dating of the plaque itself is concerned, remarkable similarities in style, motifs and certain sense of realism between the Mele Hairam plaque and some Begram carvings would be of much help here but for the pending and still unresolved debate among scholars as to the dating of the Hoard. Ranging from the 1st century BC to the 4th century CE the dates for the Begram ivory and bone objects have been recently revised by S. Mehendale who, based upon stylistic grounds, dates for construction of Depositories nos. 10 and 13, and analogies between similar finds from such other sites as Taxila, Tillya-tepe and Dal'verzintepa, suggested the 1st to early 2nd century CE dates for all the objects.²¹ L. Nehru in turn, disagreeing with S. Mehendale, has presented a rather broad dating approach with general dates ranging from the early decades of the 1st century CE to the early decades of the 3rd century CE.²² Special interest for us constitutes, however, a group of panels in high relief with crowded representations of women, regarded by L. Nehru as early and dated to the 2nd quarter of the 1st century CE.²³ This group is undoubtedly echoed by the Mele Hairam example although figures on our plaque are much less stout or heavy, with faces showing moderate Indian influence, which together with somewhat advanced execution technique may suggest a somewhat later date.

Much more indicative for the Mele Hairam plaque dating seems yet the dotted technique referred to above. The same was used for the Taxila comb dated to the end of the 1st or early 2nd century CE,²⁴ and for the Dal'verzintepa

²⁰ Wagner 2005, 25.

²¹ Hackin dated the Begram pieces between 1st and 3rd or early 4th century CE (Hackin 1939, 14-22), Stern between late 1st century and second half of the 2nd century CE (Stern 1954, 51-54), for Mehendale's dating see: Mehendale 1997, 201-205.

²² Nehru 2004, 127.

²³ Nehru 2004, 122, for an example of such representations see: Hackin *et al.* 1954, 209, fig. 130.

²⁴ Gosh 1947-1948, 79.

comb dated to the 2nd-3rd century CE²⁵, the former recently deemed belonging to the Bactrian stylistic context.²⁶ It is not impossible, therefore, that the Mele Hairam pieces were manufactured as early as 1st or 2nd century CE. This date would interestingly correspond with the Mele Hairam temple dating and indicate a not longer than a 4-century time span between the piece manufacturing and depositing dates.

As far as the provenience of our plaque is concerned, the said dotted technique is suggested for the Bactrian workshops rather than for Indian or Gandharan.²⁷ Moreover, the Bactrian touch may be further found in the intermingling of Indian (e.g. *torana*, women's clothes), Greek (man's gown) and probably local elements (e.g. women's headdresses). The immediate proximity of Mele Hairam to ancient trade routes, the so-called Silk Road, connecting Mediterranean with Chang'an, provides an explanation for how the plaque could have reached the temple. Early Arab geographers situate the Sarakhs Oasis on the main road from Bagdad through Hamadan, Ray, and Nishapur to Marv, where it bifurcated with one route leading to northeastward to Bukhara and Samarqand and the other southeastward to Marv al-Rud and Balkh.²⁸ In Balkh, there was one road leading further northeast, and the other leading southeast, traversing Begram, to the Indian subcontinent.

Hence, our ivory object could have easily arrived to the temple. However, at which point of its life and by whom it was donated to the temple, or whether it had been traveling from its place of origin already as intended for the temple, remain obscure. Most probably, the plaque found its way to the site as a luxurious gift offered to the temple. It is unclear, however, whether the plaque (or its fragment) was deposited as an independent object deprived from its original context (?chair) or did function as part of a larger piece. If the last possibility accepted, whether the decorated object was actually in use in the temple or constituted merely a sort of a treasury deposit remains a matter of conjecture. There is no doubt, however, as to the plaque having played a purely decorative role since the scenes depicted thereon are not connected in any way whatsoever with the fire temple cult but exemplify secular art with Indian elements prevailing.

²⁵ Pugachenkova, Rtveldze *et al.* 1978, 88.

²⁶ Nehru 2004, 117.

²⁷ Nehru 2004, 117.

²⁸ Barthold 1984, 44.

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